

OFFICE OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY POLICY

ACTION: Notice of Request for Information (RFI).

SUMMARY: The purpose of this Request for Information (RFI) is to solicit input from all interested parties regarding recommendations for the development of a National Plan for Civil Earth Observations (“National Plan”). The public input provided in response to this Notice will inform the Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP) as it works with Federal agencies and other stakeholders to develop this Plan.

DATES: Responses must be received by December 6, 2013 to be considered.

SUBMISSION: You may submit comments by any of the following methods.

- **Downloadable form:** To aid in information collection and analysis, OSTP encourages responses to be provided using this form. Please enter your responses in the fillable fields that follow the questions below.
- **Email:** OSTP encourages respondents to email the completed form, as an attachment, to earthobsplan@ostp.gov. Please include “National Plan for Civil Earth Observations” in the subject line of the message.
- **Fax:** (202) 456-6071.
- **Mail:** Office of Science and Technology Policy, 1650 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW, Washington, DC, 20504. Information submitted by postal mail should allow ample time for processing by security.

Response to this RFI is voluntary. Respondents need not reply to all questions listed. Each individual or institution is requested to only submit one response. Responses to this RFI, including the names of the authors and their institutional affiliations, if provided, may be posted on line. OSTP therefore requests that no business proprietary information, copyrighted information, or personally-identifiable information be submitted in response to this RFI. Given the public and governmental nature of the National Plan, OSTP deems it unnecessary to receive or to use business proprietary information in its development. Please note that the U.S. Government will not pay for response preparation, or for the use of any information contained in the response.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT:

Timothy Stryker, 202-419-3471, tstryker@ostp.eop.gov, OSTP.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:

Background

The U.S. Government is the world's largest single provider of civil environmental and Earth-system data. These data are derived from Earth observations collected by numerous Federal agencies and partners in support of their missions and are critical to the protection of human life and property; economic growth; national and homeland security; and scientific research. Because they are provided through public funding, these data are made freely accessible to the greatest extent possible to all users to advance human knowledge, to enable industry to provide value-added services, and for general public use.

Federal investments in Earth observation activities ensure that decision makers, businesses, first responders, farmers, and a wide array of other stakeholders have the information they need about climate and weather; natural hazards; land-use change; ecosystem health; water; natural resources; and other characteristics of the Earth system. Taken together, Earth observations provide the indispensable foundation for meeting the Federal Government's long-term sustainability objectives and advancing the Nation's societal, environmental, and economic well-being.

As the Nation's capacity to observe Earth systems has grown, however, so has the complexity of sustaining and coordinating civil Earth observation research, operations, and related activities. In October 2010, Congress charged the Director of OSTP to address this challenge by producing and routinely updating a strategic plan for civil Earth observations (see *National Aeronautics and Space Administration Authorization Act of 2010, Public Law 111-267, Section 702*).

Responding to Congress, in April 2013, OSTP released a [National Strategy for Civil Earth Observations](#) ("the National Strategy").

In April 2013, OSTP also re-chartered the U.S. Group on Earth Observations (USGEO) Subcommittee of the National Science and Technology Council's Committee on Environment, Natural Resources, and Sustainability. USGEO will carry out the National Strategy and support the formulation of the National Plan.

As requested by Congress, the National Plan is being developed by USGEO to advise Federal agencies on the Strategy's implementation through their investments in and operation of civil Earth observation systems. The Plan will provide a routine process, on a three-year cycle, for assessing the Nation's Earth observation investments; improving data management activities; and enhancing related interagency and international coordination. Through this approach, the Plan will seek to facilitate stable, continuous, and coordinated Earth observation capabilities for the benefit of society.

Congress also requested that development of the National Plan include a process for collecting external independent advisory input. OSTP is seeking such public advisory input through this RFI. The public input provided in response to this Notice will inform OSTP and USGEO as they work with Federal agencies and other stakeholders to develop the Plan.

Definitions and Descriptions

The term “**Earth observation**” refers to data and information products from Earth-observing systems and surveys.

“**Observing systems**” refers to one or more sensing elements that directly or indirectly collect observations of the Earth, measure environmental parameters, or survey biological or other Earth resources (land surface, biosphere, solid Earth, atmosphere, and oceans).

“**Sensing elements**” may be deployed as individual sensors or in constellations or networks, and may include instrumentation or human elements.

“**Observing system platforms**” may be mobile or fixed and are space-based, airborne, terrestrial, freshwater, or marine-based. Observing systems increasingly consist of integrated platforms that support remotely sensed, *in-situ*, and human observations.

Assessing the Benefits of U.S. Civil Earth Observation Systems

To assist decision-makers at all levels of society, the U.S. Government intends to routinely assess its wide range of civil Earth observation systems according to the ability of those systems to provide relevant data and information about the following Societal Benefit Areas (SBAs):

1. Agriculture and Forestry
2. Biodiversity
3. Climate
4. Disasters
5. Ecosystems (Terrestrial and Freshwater)
6. Energy and Mineral Resources
7. Human Health
8. Ocean and Coastal Resources and Ecosystems
9. Space Weather
10. Transportation
11. Water Resources
12. Weather

The U.S. Government also intends to consider how current and future reference measurements (*e.g.*, bathymetry, geodesy, geolocation, topography) can enable improved observations and information delivery.

To address measurement needs in the SBAs, the U.S. Government operates a wide range of atmospheric, oceanic, and terrestrial observing systems. These systems are designed to provide: (a) sustained observations supporting the delivery of services, (b) sustained observations for research, or (c) experimental observations to address specific scientific questions, further technological innovation, or improve services.

Questions to Inform Development of the National Plan

Name (optional): Arun Chawla

Position (optional): Senior Research Scientist

Institution (optional): National Weather Service

Through this RFI, OSTP seeks responses to the following questions:

1. Are the 12 SBAs listed above sufficiently comprehensive?

Yes they cover a wide range of needs

- a. Should additional SBAs be considered?

No, considering the limited resources it would be better to provide better coverage in the available SBAs before considering additional resources

- b. Should any SBA be eliminated?

No, every area shows a legitimate need

2. Are there alternative methods for categorizing Earth observations that would help the U.S. Government routinely evaluate the sufficiency of Earth observation systems?

I am not sure how the Earth observation systems are currently being categorized. I suppose the obvious approach would be a quantified approach that would measure how often the data is accessed. This of course cannot be the only approach because some data that is not regularly accessed may still be critical (for example, Tsunami observations may not be accessed as often as satellite data for daily weather as they are episodic events but they are pretty critical for safety of life).

3. What management, procurement, development, and operational approaches should the U.S. Government employ to adequately support sustained observations for services, sustained observations for research, and experimental observations? What is the best ratio of support among these three areas?

At the moment we seem to have a very haphazard approach in these areas. For ocean observations, NDBC has the mandate for maintaining all the ocean buoys. But due to logistical issues a long period of time goes between maintenance cycles. This is especially true for deep ocean buoys which are not easy to reach. Similarly we are now down to a small set of satellites because a lot of them have reached the end of their life period. Instead of asking what all we need, the government should also be asking what all can we have that ensures regular maintenance and loss of data does not become a major issue

4. How should the U.S. Government ensure the continuity of key Earth observations, and for which data streams (*e.g.*, weather forecasting, land surface change analysis, sea level monitoring, climate-change research)?

This is tricky. The US Government has to realize that this is not something that can be done alone. There has been a significant level of cooperation in data sharing of satellite data. This allows different countries to launch satellites along different tracks and get global coverage with sharing data. Having a smaller subset that is then shared with the rest of the world can be a win win situation because a smaller subset of instrumentation is easier to maintain, and at the same time having cooperative agreements allows the global community to reach into a more complete data set. This of course means that other nations have to play ball and that can be difficult

5. Are there scientific and technological advances that the U.S. Government should consider integrating into its portfolio of systems that will make Earth observations more efficient, accurate, or economical? If so, please elaborate.

[Click here to enter text.](#)

6. How can the U.S. Government improve the spatial and temporal resolution, sample density, and geographic coverage of its Earth observation networks with cost-effective, innovative new approaches?

The US government cannot do everything. It needs to have tie ins with other governments / universities / schools to make up the gaps. Even as it tries to find cheaper instrumentations.

7. Are there management or organizational improvements that the U.S. Government should consider that will make Earth observation more efficient or economical?

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8. Can advances in information and data management technologies enable coordinated observing and the integration of observations from multiple U.S. Government Earth observation platforms?

Many US agencies have proprietary databases for managing their data. This was fine when the agencies were the only sources of data. But now enterprises like Google have considerable expertise and experiences in managing data from multiple sources and displaying it. Agencies need to consider using their expertise and if multiple agencies use the same vendor then data sharing becomes easier

9. What policies and procedures should the U.S. Government consider to ensure that its Earth observation data and information products are fully discoverable, accessible, and useable?

In this approach the US I believe has been ahead of the other countries. By making the data available to all without charge does make it harder to maintain the data sets, but at the same time it gets a significant buy in from the user community because the access is there. Unfortunately the agencies do a

bad job of community outreach and though the data is available they are often in a format that the outside community may find it hard to access. You cannot blame the agencies because they are understaffed as it is. However it would not hurt to have select people whose job is to do community outreach and ensure that they have access to the data in a timely and usable format. After all the true owners of the data are the tax payers.

10. Are there policies or technological advances that the U.S. Government should consider to enhance access to Earth observation data while also reducing management redundancies across Federal agencies?

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11. What types of public-private partnerships should the U.S. Government consider to address current gaps in Earth observation data coverage and enhance the full and open exchange of Earth observation data for national and global applications?

Cell phones have become powerful enough that they are micro sensing platforms (e.g. you can get a great idea of overall traffic just by tracking how fast the phones are moving along the roads). This however can be a slippery slope so extra care needs to be taken to ensure that privacy concerns are always addressed

12. What types of interagency and international agreements can and should be pursued for these same purposes?

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